

## Fear and Anxiety in Spreading Covid-19 Vaccine Hoaxes as Terror Communication

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### Abstract

*In dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination is one of the essential strategies in ending the pandemic. However, amid vaccination efforts, various hoax information spread on social media with messages of fear and anxiety. Therefore, this study aims to reveal messages of fear, anxiety, and efficacy in spreading vaccine hoaxes through the theory of fear appeal. This study found that the most prominent communication fears were death and death threats through a content analysis approach. Anxiety communication is about vaccine impact, vaccine quality, vaccine content, and feelings of sin. Meanwhile, the efficacy communication relates to the vegetarian lifestyle, chemical treatment, and natural methods. Communication of fear and anxiety about vaccinations spread through hoaxes is intended to prevent people from vaccinating. The spread of vaccine hoaxes about fear and anxiety is part of terror communication with various labels created and also builds a discourse of distrust of the government. This research has implications for mapping vaccine hoaxes and can be a reference for the government in planning communications for the success of the vaccination program.*

### Keywords

Anxiety; covid 19; vaccines; fear; hoax



## I. Introduction

Vaccination is one of the efforts in overcoming the Covid 19 pandemic. However, amid efforts to run the program, various information categorized as a hoax is spread on social media. Claims about vaccinations causing death, disability, and other side effects quickly spread across social media platforms. The claims of hoax messages caused people's fear and anxiety to vaccinate. Several facts state that some people refuse the vaccine because after receiving the Covid 19 vaccine, they will die after three years of being given it (Ravelo, 2021). For example, people with disabilities in Yogyakarta refuse vaccines because they believe disinformation is a hoax about the post-vaccine medical effects (Septiawan & Harlan, 2021). The spread of vaccine disinformation in the form of hoaxes continued and even proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fisher et al., 2021). The outbreak of this virus has an impact of a nation and Globally (Ningrum et al, 2020). The presence of Covid-19 as a pandemic certainly has an economic, social and psychological impact on society (Saleh and Mujahiddin, 2020). Covid 19 pandemic caused all efforts not to be as maximal as expected (Sihombing and Nasib, 2020).

Hoaxes are deceptive warning messages designed to undermine public trust in an organization, product, service, or person (Sellnow et al., 2019). Usually, hoaxes are associated with individuals or groups who secretly plan to achieve specific goals (Park & Rim, 2019). Hoaxes are a strategy to maximize public attention because those exposed to hoaxes oversimplify problems and process information in passing to make heuristic decisions (Linden, 2015). Vaccine hoaxes are fear-inducing antagonisms designed to scare

recipients into compliance by threatening them with negative consequences for non-compliance.

The appeal of fear is used in many types of communication—for example, marketing communications, market products, services, social causes, and ideas. The basic message is, "if you do not do this, buy, or choose, certain dire consequences will occur" (Glascoff, 2000). In health communication, fear messages are designed to modify a variety of behaviors, including drinking and driving, smoking, domestic violence, food handling, and unprotected sex. (Hunt & Shehryar, 2011)

Likewise, the attraction of this fear to the spread of the Covid 19 vaccine hoax. Hoaxes are deliberately designed so that people experience fear or anxiety and do not get vaccinated, as recommended in response to Covid 19. The reluctance to vaccinate is driven by emotional sentiment regarding doubts about the impact of the accompanying caused and decreased quality of vaccine absorption (Dubé et al., 2014).

Fear appeal theory is a theory that explains persuasive messages to try to arouse fear by emphasizing the potential harm that will befall individuals if they do not adopt the message recommendations (Dillard et al., 1996). The fear appeal consists of three main concepts: fear, threat, and perceived efficacy (Williams et al., 2012). Fear is a negative emotion usually accompanied by an increase in physiological arousal. Witte et al. (1996) explained that the fear generated by health messages would be received from various sources can cause a person to show an adaptive response or a maladaptive response to the message, and fear inhibits healthy behavior change unless a person knows how to protect himself (Redmond et al. al., 2015).

Fear appeal messages vary both in the degree of fear evoked and in the qualitative nature of the threat. In terms of the nature of the threat, some fear appeals pose threats of injury or adverse social outcomes, while others pose threats of death. For example, fearful appeals made when drinking more minor and driving could include threats of arrest or death in a car accident. Fear exclamation messages, including death threats, may evoke different behavioral responses when compared to fear calls for the threat of injury or adverse social outcomes (Hunt & Shehryar, 2011).

A threat is an external stimulus that creates a perception in the message's recipient that they are vulnerable to some negative situation or outcome. Threat assessment is the perception of the severity that will arise from assessing the seriousness of the threat, namely the perception of severity, and responds to the threat as perceived vulnerability. If the number of perceived threat's severity and vulnerability is high enough, the emotion of fear will emerge. The fear appeal theory states that the recipient becomes afraid and will continue the response process not to take the recommended action (Jansen & Verstappen, 2014). Vaccine-related anxiety reactions are recognized by the Council of International Medical Sciences (CIOMS) as one of five categories of adverse events after immunization (AEFI); The other four AEFI categories include reactions to vaccine products, reactions to vaccine quality defects, reactions to immunization errors, and accidental events (Loharikar et al., 2018).

Perceived efficacy is a person's belief that the message recommendation can be implemented and will effectively reduce the threat described in the message (Redmond et al., 2015). Witte and Allen (2000) have concluded that fear appeals are most effective when they contain high levels of threat and efficacy. The message needs to contain, firstly, a significant threat or issue of importance and, second, specific targeted actions that the individual can take to reduce the threat or problem. The individual needs to understand that there are ways to deal with the threat and that he or she is capable of performing the behavior. (Eckart, 2011).

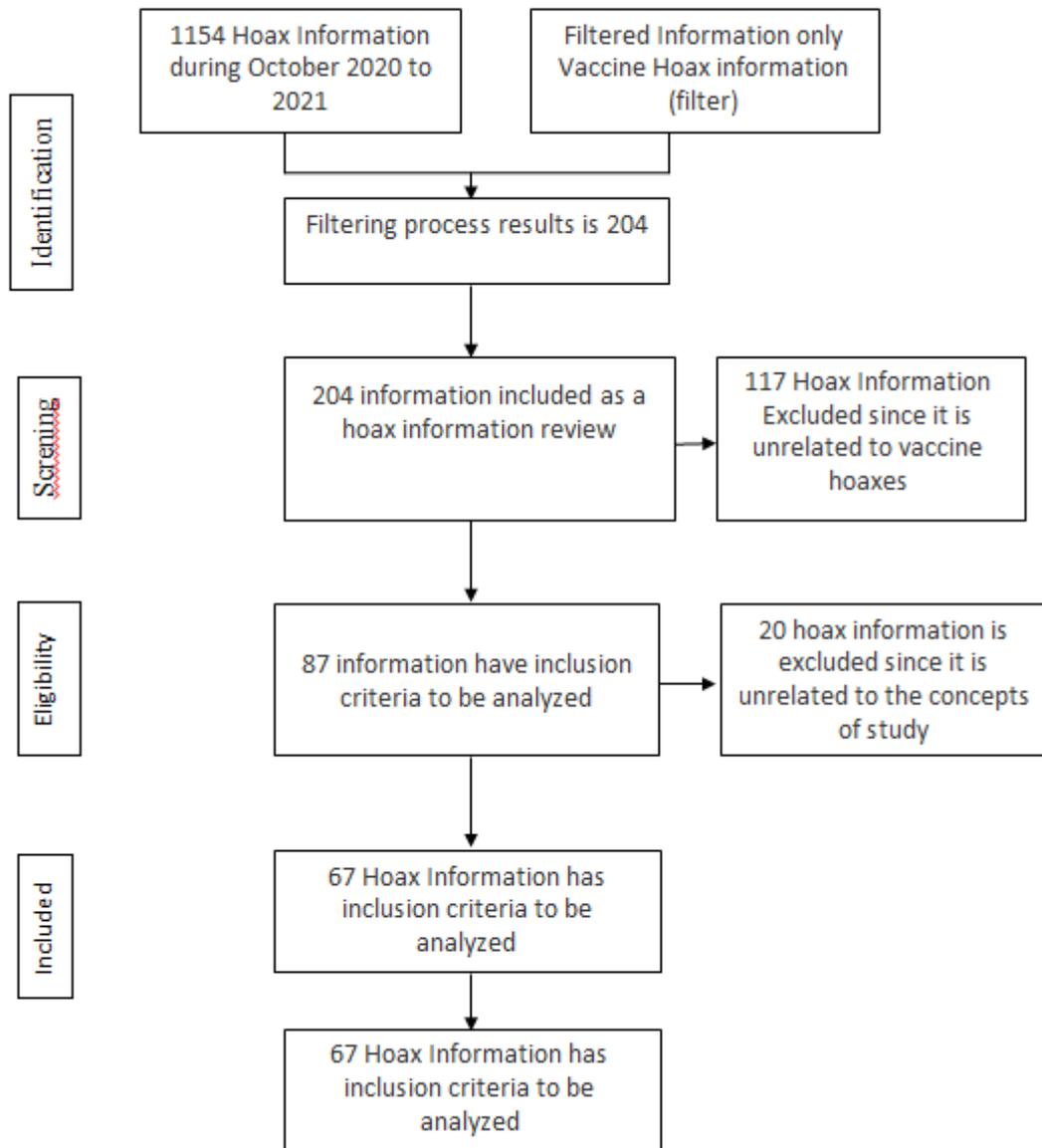
Research on the COVID-19 vaccine hoax is still rarely done. Previous research, which was still focused on studies on the dangers of vaccines and crisis communication in the public sphere, resulted in the finding of the public's need for health information to form a personal communication space that made the public as producers and consumers of health information (Winanti & Novi, 2020). The results of research on community behavior related to the spread of Covid-19 hoaxes found that the rapid spread of Covid-19 hoax information caused them to hesitate to act to spread or store hoax information. On the other hand, for the perpetrators of dissemination, the information will be helpful in others, and the community as a whole is quite adequate in understanding hoax information (Juditha, 2020). In the discussion about Covid 19 on WhatsApp, the theme that was formed was about their awareness of the virus, while the conversation found four categories, namely; the use of everyday language, the use of stickers facilitated by the application, the use of screenshots of images from other websites, and the use of mixed languages between Indonesian and English (Indriani & Prasanti, 2020). Research related to messages issued by the Ministry of Health in dealing with hoaxes circulating in the community regarding Covid-19 vaccination is by presenting health experts in providing information related to the Covid-19 vaccine (Bafadhal & Santoso, 2020). Research on public engagement in crisis communication about COVID-19 during the epidemic's early stages and practical social mobilization strategies to mitigate the infodemic (Hu et al., 2020). It reviewed previous research, focusing more on public awareness in responding to the spread of Covid 19 hoaxes.

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## II. Research Method

The methodology used in this research is qualitative content analysis, a technique used to identify and describe patterns in a collection of texts. Content analysis is used inductively or deductively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This study uses inductive analysis to find and verify patterns in the text corpus (Kynga's H. & Vanhanen L., 1999). Inductive content analysis can begin with predetermined categories and constantly test and revise these categories during and after the data collection process (Burns N. & Grove S.K., 2005).



Source: <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>

**Figure 1.** Hoax Information Inclusion Criteria

In collecting data for analysis purposes, we adapted the meta-analysis protocol with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses) model. PRISMA is an evidence-based minimum set of items for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses, focusing primarily on reporting to evaluate the review of the

effects of interventions (Page et al., 2021; Liberati et al., 2009). The data collection process was carried out extensively by scanning all hoax information between October 2020 to March 2021. Based on the concepts of the fear appeal theory, inclusion and inclusion criteria were applied as the unit of analysis. The search results obtained 1154 hoax information. After the exclusion and inclusion process was carried out, there was 67 hoax information that met the inclusion criteria for analysis—the process of exclusion and inclusion, as in Figure 1.



Source: Kominfo, 2021

Figure 2. Face paralysis after Covid-19 vaccinated



Source: Kominfo, 2021

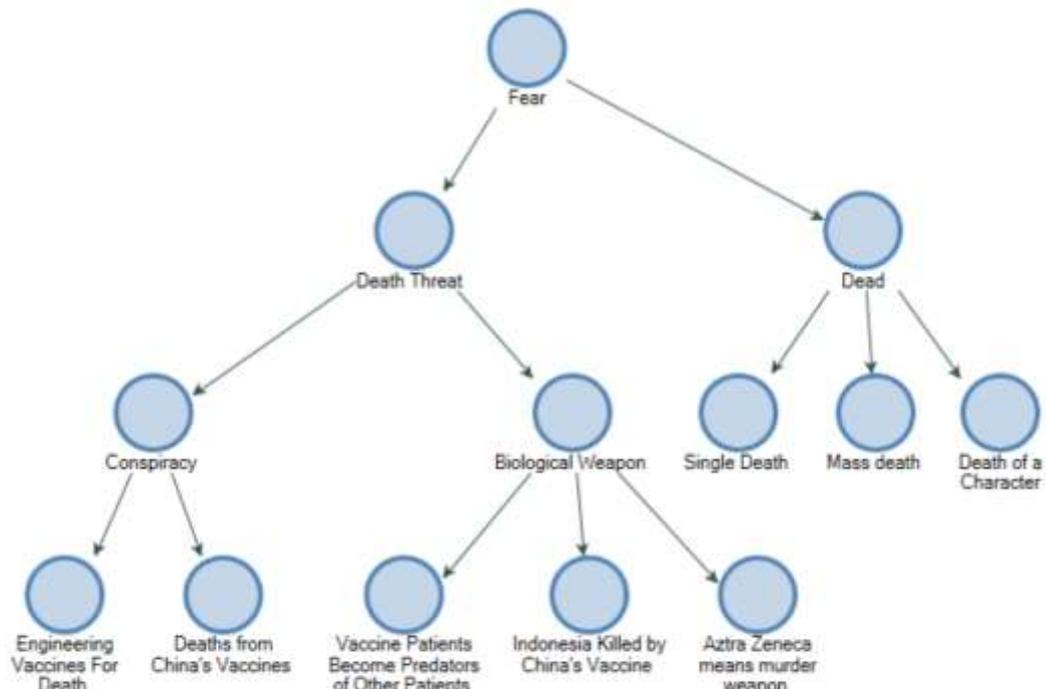
Figure 3. Indonesian people will be killed by Chinese vaccine

### III. Result and Discussion

This study seeks to reveal the themes of the attraction of fear, anxiety, and efficacy in the spread of the Covid 19 vaccination hoax. In contrast to the appeal of fear in marketing or health communications, they deliberately created to follow the recommended actions. The spread of vaccine hoax messages is intended to distrust vaccinations and is included in the anti-vaccine group. In the appeal of fear, the themes that emerge are death and death threats. Anxiety appeals are the medical impact, guilt feelings, vaccine content, and vaccine quality. Treatment with herbs, chemicals, and natural remedies appeals to efficacy. This efficacy is understood as a genuine medical and non-medical alternative to avoid vaccination.

Fear appeal is a persuasive message that attempts to arouse fear by emphasizing the potential harm that will befall individuals if they do not adopt the message's recommendations (Dillard et al., 1996). The appeal of fear explicitly mentions death as a significant threat. The terror management theory approach (TMT) makes three predictions about this threat. According to TMT, when people are reminded of their death, they are confronted with the concept of death, so they often become motivated to support their self-esteem to reduce death-related anxiety.

The study results explain that the attraction of fear has 2 main themes, namely death and death threats, as shown in Figure 4. There are 13 hoax posts about death, divided into categories, namely mass death, a single death, and the death of a character. In mass death, the evocative manipulated the mass death after Covid 19 vaccination in various countries, such as Germany, Israel, China, and Singapore. For example, Facebook's social media mention of Pfizer BioNTech's vaccine for Covid-19 has caused a fatal reaction and many deaths in Israel. Likewise, Singapore has stopped the vaccination program because there were cases that died. In Indonesia, several health workers died due to the Pfizer vaccine.



Source : N Vivo analysis, 2021

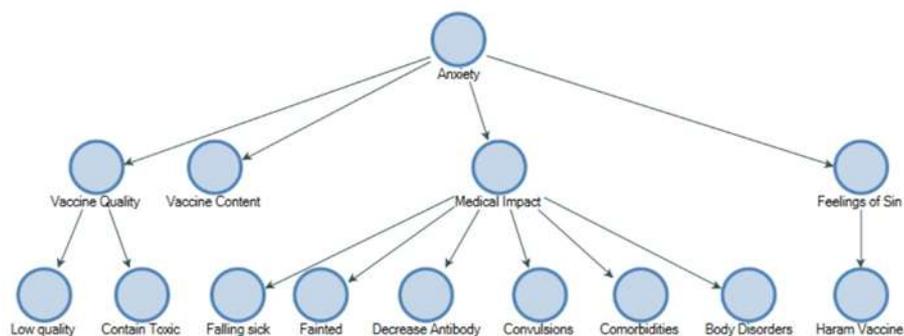
**Figure 4.** Fear appealing

## 4.2 Integration Result in the Course

A single death is a death experienced by a person due to vaccination. Meanwhile, the vaccine brand that causes death is Sinovac's vaccine. For example, a hoax narration spread on Facebook social media, "The first recipient of the Chinese Sinovac covid 19 vaccine injection, died". A hoax about the death of Danramil Kebomas in Gresik due to vaccination. However, the actual information died of heart disease and was never vaccinated. The single death hoax was also experienced and known by religious leaders, such as citing the deaths of Ustadz Maher At Thuwailibi and Sheikh Ali Jaber, who died from being injected with a vaccine, citing the name of the vaccine, namely Sinovac, as the cause. Likewise, what happened to Hank Aaron, the United States baseball star who died from the vaccine.

In the death category, the actor is often presented as a scapegoat as the cause is the Sinovac vaccine produced in China. Although other production vaccines, such as Pzifer, are also mentioned, they are relatively small. Regarding the Sinovac vaccine, when the government announced the procurement of the vaccine and collaborated with Sinovac, it caused controversy with various criticisms from the opposition. For example, a statement from Fadli Zon gave the term "hammer and sickle vaccine." This refers to the symbol of the Chinese flag as a communist country (Sulistiyanto & Jamil, 2021).

There are several essential keywords on the theme of death threats, such as China, killing, and engineering. Referring to the conspiracy theory, the hoax spreader stated that vaccines were engineered not for Covid. On the contrary, Covid was designed to make vaccines as poison. In addition, through WhatsApp groups and Facebook posts circulating, "China aims to kill 100 Indonesian people through vaccines". From the theme of death threats, the fear narrative that will be built is that China is the source of the problem and will carry out genocide on the Indonesian people through vaccines, and as a provocative problem solving with a collective movement to change Jokowi's government.



Source: N Vivo analysis, 2021

**Figure 5.** Anxiety

In this theme, Muslims are also reminded of the vigilance of Muslims against China's plans for vaccination. The problem of anxiety about vaccination, compared to anxiety about social and economic impacts, is still more significant due to the impact of vaccination (Bendau et al., 2021). The study results found 4 themes of the spread of

vaccine hoaxes that caused anxiety, namely, medical impact, feelings of sin, vaccine content, and vaccine quality. Each theme is divided into several categories, as shown in Figure 5.

The impact of vaccines related to vaccination side effects is a local reaction in the body (Quiroga et al., 2021). In the spread of hoaxes, anxiety about the impact of vaccines found 6 sub-categories, namely convulsions, fainting, body abnormalities, decreased antibodies, comorbidities, falling ill.

Referring to these criteria for falling ill, effects occur, such as on the arm (pain or swelling), lymphadenopathy, fatigue, headache, diarrhea, nausea, chills, myalgia, low-grade fever (body temperature between 37 and 37.8 degrees Celsius), fever (body temperature 37.8 degrees Celsius or higher (Navarre et al., 2021).

In hoax content, there is a claim that a Korean woman experienced the effects of convulsions and shortness of breath after the Covid 19 vaccination. Likewise, on the Youtube platform in a foreign language, it was seen that a woman fell due to the Covid 19 vaccination. Civilians who present themselves as actors refer to state officials, such as the President. For example, Facebook circulated that Jokowi experienced convulsions after being injected with the Sinovac vaccine and later died.

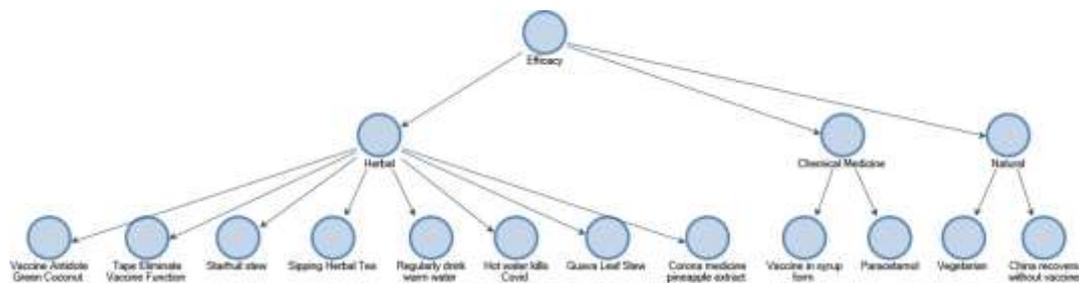
They are experiencing fainting after vaccination becomes part of forming anxiety. Posts circulating on Whatsapp in the form of video recordings show dozens of students fainting due to the Covid vaccination with the Sinovac vaccine. Other posts, such as hundreds of people fainting after vaccination. Video recording evidence is justification and supporting data to show that COVID-19 prevention vaccination is not safe. In addition, video recordings, accompanied by provocative narratives, such as questioning the purpose of vaccines, prevent Covid 19 or reduce population. Likewise, for posts regarding the decrease in antibodies, those who vaccinate will experience a decrease in antibodies and are susceptible to disease. The narration of one of the posts circulating on Facebook contains information related to antibody levels after being vaccinated against Covid-19. In the visualization, a graph shows the condition of a person's antibodies after a few days of receiving the vaccine, regarding other medical impacts, such as falling ill, with postings of disinformation about the Regent of Pasuruan falling ill after vaccination.

The emergence of comorbidities and body disorders due to vaccination stands out in the impact of vaccines. Comorbidities that arise are the presence of post-vaccination cancer. In postings in the form of articles on websites explaining the research results, vaccines derived from mRNA can cause cancer and inactivate proteins that function to kill natural tumors that free humans from cancer. Furthermore, related to comorbidities, the hoax posted is the presence of laziness in thinking and the onset of leukemia.

As for body disorders, there are 3 main categories, namely biological changes, body defects, and DNA changes. Biological change is a decrease in the function of an organism that refers to complete failure, including failure of an organ or organ system (Meiner & Lueckenotte, 2006). In hoax posts, vaccinations can cause infertility, facial changes to become swollen, blistered feet, and light skin. Regarding physical disability, there is no specific mention of the physical disability suffered. Regarding DNA changes, uploads on Facebook in the form of video recordings of interviews with a doctor who stated that vaccination could change DNA genetically. Vaccine quality is also a prominent theme in generating anxiety. There are 2 categories, namely low-quality and toxic vaccines. Hoax displayed the low quality of the vaccine. The vaccine brand that is often featured is Sinovac. This vaccine is described as a weak, infeasible, Sinovac vaccine for chicken vaccines. In a post on Twitter in the form of a videotaped statement by a Chinese

Communist Party (CCP) official admitting the Sinovac vaccine was not feasible. Accompanied by a narrative, the CCP admits that vaccines made in China do not meet the standards. For toxic vaccines, Pfizer brand toxic and dangerous vaccines. While Sinovac resulted in death.

What is interesting is the emergence of the theme of feelings of sin. This theme relates to prohibitions based on religious beliefs. The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) prohibits vaccination because it is haram and comes from China. Likewise, the Church prohibits vaccination because it is haram. The issue of halal and haram vaccines had surfaced when the government planned to vaccinate domestically, handling Covid 19. In the MUI fatwa, for example, it states that the Astra Zeneca vaccine is haram but can be used because of an emergency (BBC.Com, 2020).



Source: N Vivo analysis, 2021

**Figure 6.** Efficacy

Efficacy plays an essential role in health communication messages rather than a threat to convince people to adopt health-related behaviors (Ort, 2018). However, in the spread of vaccination hoaxes, the message of efficacy is a medical substitute for not vaccinating. The study results explain that there are 3 themes regarding efficacy, namely chemical treatment, the use of herbs, natural remedies, as shown in Figure 6.

There are posts about vaccines in syrup form in chemical medicine intended for those who are afraid of needles. For the use of herbs, several alternatives posted on social media, such as tape and green coconut water, can eliminate the function of the vaccine. In addition, hoaxes were also spread about preventing Covid 19 by means, such as drinking guava leaf decoction, pineapple extract, star fruit water, and boiling water or hot steam to prevent and cure Covid 19. While the natural way is done by adopting a vegetarian lifestyle or a hoax message that says China is recovering without a vaccine.

Vaccine hoaxes are false and manipulative claims with messages that create fear and anxiety about getting vaccinated. Research findings explain that the attraction of fear is constructed so that when vaccinating, they will experience death or death threats. In the spread of hoaxes of fear, China's Sinovac vaccine is described as a killer vaccine and calls for Muslims to be wary of genocide through vaccines. Likewise, regarding anxiety, apart from the medical impact, vaccine quality, and vaccine content, anxiety is related to religious beliefs.

Based on the research findings, the discussion will discuss the Covid 19 vaccine hoax as a form of terror communication. In the study of health communication, messages about fear and anxiety are intended to take recommended actions. However, when it appears in the form of hoax messages, false and manipulative claims about vaccines attempt to intimidate people to create fear and anxiety about not vaccinating.

In addition, the discussion also reflected on the distrust of the government and the discourse of promoting identity. This fact explains that political interests are always

present in every space and time to realize specific power goals. In this context, the spread of hoaxes as a political movement is understood as an effort to foster distrust of government policies and affirm the existence of specific identities.

The study results found that vaccines are constructed as killers, which cause death and threats and can also cause side effects in the form of body defects. In addition, the spread of hoaxes contains various alternative efforts, both medical and non-medical, to neutralize vaccinations and prevent Covid 19. The overall appeal of fear and anxiety in vaccine hoaxes causes people to be afraid to vaccinate. These results support when the fear attraction theory is applied in other studies, such as anti-doping studies, to protect athlete health. Claims about doping deaths have become a practical fear communication discourse in tackling doping (López, 2014). Another study of persuasive messages that threaten or arouse fear should only affect behavior if efficacy and threat are manipulated (Peters et al., 2013). Hoax is a manipulated part of the message product.

On the other hand, the appeal of fear through the spread of vaccine hoaxes is a form of terror communication. Namely, the dissemination of certain manipulative information, which does not contain the truth, and lies to influence attitudes and influence the target audience's behavior to engage in specific actions (Pellerin, 2016). In the perspective of Terror Management Theory (TMT) for health, terror communication emphasizes the importance of death in influencing how someone talks about health decisions. (Nisbett & Harvell, 2018). In a study on the design of antismoking health, messages found negative physical and social impacts of smoking effective in message design (Wong et al., 2017).

In general, terror communication is an essential part of acts of terrorism. Communication is done by intimidating, spreading fear, and anxiety through ritualization and mediation when carrying out terrorist attacks (Pellerin, 2016). Mediatization refers to coercive efforts for media coverage of acts of terror, while ritualization is the will to demonstrate the sacred purpose of the act. When acts of violence and murder are communicated through ritualization and mediation, they produce the typical product of fear, intimidation, and anxiety. The Communicating Terror (CT) approach explains that the meaning of terrorism is socially constructed and encourages a new understanding of terrorism, especially as a communication process, between terrorists and more than one audience. Terror communication (C.T.) provides an understanding of acts of terrorism, creating rhetorical actions through rhetorical messages in the form of labels, definitions, and symbolism (Tuman, 2010). The terror communication (C.T.) approach, when attached to the spread of vaccine hoaxes with rhetorical elements, creates labels at the level of appeal of fear, such as death, death threats from China's Sinovac vaccine, and body defects.

Another finding from this study is that hoaxes are also a means to spread distrust of the government. These findings represent the existence of political interests, namely by carrying out attacks against the government or various narratives that create distrust of the government. Hoaxes are categorized as political goals if there are false claims about defamation of one of the political candidates or attacks on a policy to gain support. Hoax's claims were intentional and proven wrong (Sellnow et al., 2019). Political activists create hoaxes, often taking advantage of existing conspiracy theories, by adapting messages to justify their activities or to draw attention to the issues they are fighting for (Park & Rim, 2019b).

In Indonesia, coinciding with the election of the Governor of DKI Jakarta at the end of 2016 to April 2017, the emergence of hoaxes intensified, attacking competing candidates. A survey of 1,116 respondents by the Indonesian Telematics Society (Masyarakat Telematika Indonesia/MASTEL) ten days before the first round of the DKI Jakarta Pilkada found a relatively high distribution of hoax content. 44.3% of respondents

stated that they received hoax content every day, and 17.2% of them received it more than once per day. The survey also showed that 91.8% of hoax content received by users contained socio-political topics (related to the election of governors government), and 88.6% contained racial or SARA themes (Mastel, 2017).

The spreading of hoaxes as a political tool is not limited to its use in political rituals such as regional elections or presidential elections. But also in other fields, such as in vaccination. There is a political element in spreading this corona hoax to create public unrest and discomfort. The perception of distrust in the government is built because it cannot protect its people (Saputra, 2021). Based on police investigations of hoax spreaders, as revealed by the Head of the Public Relations Division of the National Police, Brigadier General (Pol) Argo Yuwono said, several of the perpetrators' motives were, among others, for fun and feeling dissatisfied with the government (Halim, 2020).

#### IV. Conclusion

Based on the study results, it can be concluded that the appeal of fear regarding the Covid 19 vaccine, which was spread through hoax information, found death and death threats as the attraction of fear. This is evidenced by various hoax information regarding vaccine deaths. There are 3 (three) essential findings in the theme of death, namely single death, mass death, and character death. As for the threat of death, the themes that emerged were poisoned vaccines. Vaccines made predators, and China's death threats against the Indonesian population through vaccines.

The attraction of anxiety was found in dominant themes, such as the impact of the vaccine, feelings of sin, the quality of the vaccine, and the content of the vaccine. In the impact of vaccines, the spread of hoaxes is related to side effects in the form of post-vaccination defects. Feelings of sin because they think vaccines are haram. Vaccine quality describes the vaccine's toxicity and low vaccine efficacy. For vaccine content, hoaxes contain substances that are harmful to the body.

The spread of vaccine hoaxes regarding the appeal of efficacy is not understood as a vaccination effort to prevent Covid 19 but a non-vaccine alternative to not vaccinating. The findings in this study are the use of herbs, chemical treatments, and natural remedies. The use of herbs can be done by, for example, drinking hot water, green coconut as an antidote to vaccines, or drinking a decoction of guava leaves—chemical treatment by drinking syrup or paracetamol. For natural remedies by living a vegetarian lifestyle.

Communication of fear about vaccines spread through hoaxes is part of a form of manipulative and intimidating terror communication with various labels and symbols so that people are afraid to vaccinate. In addition, the spread of hoaxes is a provocation media to create distrust of the government and a media to assert the existence of identity.

The suggestion for further research is a quantitative approach using survey techniques to find out the community's response to the spread of the Covid 19 vaccine hoax. This is important, the spread of hoaxes that have become infodemic, whether or not they significantly influence the disinformation that develops around the community.

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